

Concha Romero. *Un maldito beso*. Murcia, Universidad de Murcia, 1994, 91 pp.

This edition of *Un maldito beso* makes broadly accessible an intriguing, well-crafted play formerly available only in a 1989 issue of *Gestos* (4.8). A one-act play by Concha Romero, one of Spain's most innovative and independent young playwrights, was lacking in my *Dramaturgas españolas de hoy* (Madrid: Fundamentos, 1989) only because the author had, curiously enough, no short piece at the time. Enhancing the attractiveness of the Murcia publication is a comprehensive fourteen-page introduction by Virtudes Serrano, a scholar who has distinguished herself in recent years with several publications on Spanish women dramatists. In her analysis of *Un maldito beso*, Serrano pays special attention to dramatic structure, the variety of theatrical languages utilized, the function in the play of three generations of women and the male characterizations. In addition, Serrano provides useful bibliographical information.

A common thread running through Concha Romero's theater is an ironic, black-humor vision of the world from the woman's perspective. Frequently portrayed are male hypocrisy, infidelity and general misappropriations of authority in business (including the Church), marriage and personal relationships. Within this broad ideological framework, Romero's work falls into two subgroups: 1) plays built around historical, literary or mythological figures who speak in a classic, atemporal style (*Un olor a ámbar*, 1983; *Juego de reinas*, 1988; *Bodas de una princesa*, 1988; *Así aman los dioses*, 1991), and 2) plays of contemporary speech and setting that lack intertextual support language (*Allá él*, 1994 and *¿Tengo razón o no?*, 1995). A hybrid, *Un maldito beso* blends both tendencies.

With a cast of five, this two-act metatheatrical comedy asks a serious question: is theater —i.e., scripted, rehearsed and performed fiction— more credible than observed actions of necessity improvised in real-life situations? The work also probes the impact of belief on psychological processes and illustrates defense mechanisms set in motion by the abuses of power. In the opening scene, as María, a thirty-five-year-old actress, rehearses her role from *Macbeth*, she lays the groundwork for the play's central mystery by complaining of difficulty in remembering her lines. The integration of fantasy with reality is accentuated, moreover, when,

as Lady Macbeth, María says «someone is at the door» at the moment her husband, Manolo, arrives. A theater impresario, the latter has invested heavily in a production of the shakespearean play scheduled to open that evening. After a brief exchange between husband and wife, María leaves to attend the funeral of an actor friend.

Manolo, alone now, receives a visit from Sabrina, a young woman who pretends to be a journalist requesting an interview about the forthcoming premiere; in reality, however, she is an aspiring actress in search of a job. When Sabrina eventually reveals her ruse, Manolo, attracted to the young woman, agrees to audition her. He suggests that she improvise the role of a neighbor who takes advantage of his wife's absence to confess her love for him. At one point in the scene extemporized by Sabrina, she directs Manolo to kiss her passionately. At the precise moment that Manolo obliges, María, having returned from the funeral, opens the door to witness the act which gives title to the play and sets in motion the dramatic tension. María faints (a romantic-drama ploy?) and, when she awakens, denies seeing Manolo and insists that she has just attended her husband's funeral. Like Lady Macbeth, María has not literally soiled her hands in a wished-for —and, in this case, truly bloodless— murder. A potentially more serious assault on the husband involves María's failure (real or pretended?) to recall a single line of his *Macbeth* investment, the financial outcome of which could be determined within hours. Indeed, a stellar performance by María on opening night is of utmost importance to Manolo, for whom critical as well as economic success confers status and bolsters masculine identity. In María's value system, however, love, fidelity and trust are paramount. This play confronts male and female priorities, and it is clear that María gains the upper hand early on.

In Romero's metatheatrical romp, playful *equivocos* abound as make believe is constantly mistaken for reality and vice versa. Indeed, seven of the nine scenes involve the play-within-the play mechanism, and the characters constantly shift roles from dramatists, to actors, to directors, to spectators. Although the three women struggle alone, Manolo, the negative of the old-fashioned male, arrogant and insensitive, cheats in this guerrilla-warfare game as he does in real life. With his win-at-all-cost philosophy, he elicits the collaboration of a psychiatrist neighbor in the concoction of psychodramas designed to shock María into 1) revealing the artifi-

ce or 2) eradicating this inconvenient symptom of emotional trauma. Desperate for her to perform, little concerned about her personal pain and perfectly willing to risk greater psychological damage, Manolo rewrites and replays for María the painful «precipitating» scene with Sabrina in which the young actress will now be compensated (i.e., become a professional actress) for performing the now-scripted kiss. No attempt, however, proves a match for María's improvisational skills... or is it the depth of her depression?

Although Romero denies any conscious feminist impulse, her female characters in this and other works seek equality with men, and often a turning of the gender tables shows that what is good for the goose is good for the gander. In her «pay-back» scene, María directs the psychiatrist and performs with him her version of the kiss for an unsuspecting Manolo. The results of this role playing bring the play to a conclusion in harmony with its essential ambiguity. Indeed, those who ponder whether María really has amnesia or is cleverly and effectively punishing a philandering husband —ironically unmasked through role playing—, will not solve the puzzle definitively. When the final curtain falls, the question persists: has the shock of the *maldito beso* produced a temporary psychosis, or has María, completely in control, given a series of convincing improvisations for which her talent and training admirably equip her?

Theater scholars will find useful the relatively new «Antología Teatral Española» of contemporary plays with accompanying introductions. *Un maldito beso* will be of particular interest to the many Hispanists concerned with women's discourse. Although as yet untranslated to English, Romero's play has considerable potential for international success. The fact that Serrano's reading differs from mine is evidence that *Un maldito beso* challenges the spectator/reader and does not answer all questions posed.

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